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ABSTRACT

Based on the author's research and experience with organizational decline, this speech discusses research on managing declining schools and provides a framework for thinking about decline. The long period of abundance between World War II and the middle 1970s shaped American character and accustomed its leaders, including school administrators, to judge their success in terms of growth. Most were not trained to respond appropriately to a slowing economy and declining resources. According to David Whetten, school administrators skilled in managing scarcity must be one of education's first priorities. Competition for scarce resources leads to distrust and escalated adversarial relationships and creates other personnel problems. The school districts most vulnerable are those lacking institutional vitality and effectiveness. Whetten suggests that managerial attitudes fall into four response categories: preventing, defending, "weathering the storm" or cutting back, and "generating." Proponents of the "generating" approach argue that school system leaders should view decline as an opportunity to redesign their organizations to create greater vitality and improved performance. School effectiveness research makes little overt reference to school finances, but offers managers of decline some valuable insights. In austere times, the optimistic, proactive leader can offer a new vision and help create a new school culture. Appended are 50 ideas to help superintendents generate a positive response to declining resources and a bibliography of 106 references. (MLH)

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GENERATING A POSITIVE RESPONSE TO DECLINING RESOURCES:

50 TIPS FOR SUCCESS IN A DECLINING SCHOOL DISTRICT*

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The origin of my interest in the management of decline goes back to early in this decade when the district in which I was working as an assistant superintendent suffered the defeat of an operations levy upon which it depended for over 30 percent of its revenue. The subsequent reaction of both the school community and the public was shock and disbelief. The decisions made by a semi-panicked community over the next couple of months eventually resulted in numerous setbacks to years of school improvement efforts.

We also discovered that an outstanding district with an exceptional school board and administration was ill equipped to respond to the loss of the resources on which it came to depend.

Not long after these events, I had the opportunity to conduct a major review of the research literature on the management of declining school districts. (After glancing at the clouds on the horizon, I thought it would be useful information as long as I was planning to stay in the school administration business.) I was still in the process of analyzing my data when I assumed the superintendency of a 1800 student district. At the outset, still in the glow of a new challenge, I had no idea that I would be able to put my newly acquired knowledge about managing decline into practice so quickly.

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In 1984, a series of community events began to unfold that led eventually to the loss of 25 percent of the district's tax base. Dozens of farms and ranches were lost to the hand of foreclosure. The community's largest employer went out of business. Enrollments dropped, which in turn resulted in a loss of state aid and; as if to place a final exclamation point to the events, the district's middle school burned. 400 students had to be moved to makeshift facilities.

In the next four years, I did rely on my research and experience a great deal. I also learned that a little knowledge didn't prevent me from making a fair number of mistakes.

In the time alloted to me today, I will share some of the research on the management of declining schools that I found helpful. I will also attempt to provide you with a framework for thinking about decline. I have prepared an addendum called "50 Tips for Generating a Positive Response to Declining Resources" and an extensive bibliography on the subject which is also attached.

History of Resource Decline

The time after World War II to the middle 1970s has been cited by economists as a period of unprecedented growth in North America. In the U.S. the gross national product multiplied several times and the country's population doubled. Public institutions experienced similar growth and prosperity. For several decades public schools saw increased enrollments, the construction of new schools, and the expansion of programs and services. Observers have noted that the long period of abundance shaped American character and molded its leaders, including school administrators, to judge their success in terms of growth. Charles Levine, a scholar who studied the issue, argues that when the economy began to slow and school resources began to decline, many school leaders were not prepared by training or experience to respond appropriately. School administrators were trained to manage the problems and opportunities of growth. In many areas, growth continues to be

present and a problem. That is not the case in many rural areas. The scarcity of resources, however, seems to be a problem in both growing and declining school systems.

David Whetten, writing from Purdue University, argues that the need for school administrators who are skilled in the management of scarcity must be one of education's first priorities. Whetten has studied the impact of resource decline on school systems for some time. He notes that the competition of scarce resources contributes to distrust and escalated adversarial relationships. Conflicts between teachers and management and between pro and anti school funding advocates make up a good part of the news and influence the work agendas of many school administrators.

Lack of growth creates other personnel problems. Usual promotion incentives become more limited; professional mobility tends to decrease; the opportunity to attract new and creative talents is reduced at the very time conditions may require the greatest infusion of energy and innovation

Stagnation

The school districts most vulnerable to disorder in a period of limited and declining resources are those in which institutional vitality and effectiveness are low. During periods of growth these schools are often able to compensate for their limited performance by distributive policies that effectively enable them to buy their way out of trouble. That is, resources are dispersed in such a way that everyone gets something. F.L. Dembowski suggests that distributive policies are typical of growing or prosperous organizations and are used to resolve conflict. Dembowski and others who have studied the use of distributive practices, claim it is a well established way of reconciling diverse and conflicting pressure upon schools. When a pressure group complains that the schools should be doing one thing rather than another, the controversy may be resolved by simply adopting the new proposal and keeping the old. In periods of economic limits, competing demands cannot be

pacified as before and a school system without institutional vitality is poorly equipped to cope with the controversy that ensues.

Administrative Attitudes

Many, if not most, experts on the management of scarcity emphasize the importance of administrative attitudes toward change. David Whetten, who I have cited previously, suggests managerial attitude falls into four categories.

Figure 1

Whetten's view is of two proactive responses on either end of the continuum, one reflecting a negative attitude toward change, and the other, the generating response category, an indicator of positive attitude toward change.

The "Preventing" response to scarcity typically takes the form of compensatory strategies intended to avoid or reduce the loss of resources, a common form of "Prevention" response is organized political activity to induce legislators, school boards and other financial support agencies to increase allocations to schools.

"Defending" strategies are employed by educators in an effort to capture public sentiment for ideological values that support public education. Appeals for the need to protect the welfare of children from the effects of budget cuts may be used and it would be expected that employee loyalty, competence and efficiency would be offered up as rationalization for why budget cuts should be avoided.

A third category for response to change may characterize as "weathering out the storm". Levine argues that cutback policies such as across the board cuts, reduction in force, and program terminations are passive responses which reflect resignation to the inevitable necessity to reduce the size of the school system. Managers who employ "cutback" strategies typically view decline as a threat to the survival of the system. Characteristically, one of the most common side effects of this management approach is goal displacement in which long term education improvement goals give way to short range objectives adopted to reduce turbulance.

My own view is that scarcity inevitably requires some cutbacks, but with judicious review of priorities, valuable programs and services can be protected while at the same time using the opportunity afforded by the "decline" climate, less productive programs and services can be eliminated with minimum objections.

The three response modes discussed to this point are commonly combined in practice. Depending on the circumstances, one, two or all three responses may be employed by educational managers in the same general situation.

Generating Responses to Scarcity

The fourth response to limited economic resources is called "generating". Much of the promotion for adapting generating responses comes from scholars and practitioners who argue that school system leaders should view decline as an opportunity to redesign their organizations to create greater vitality and improved performance. Many of the tips I have included in the handout are presented from this point of view. In spite of facing what at time seemed like overwhelming problems, our school system continued to develop and implement the school improvement reforms it had planned prior to the conditions of decline.

The Contributions of Effective Schools Research

School effectiveness research makes little direct reference to school finances; nevertheless, the manager of decline has much to gain from this body of knowledge. As an example, the following summary of effectiveness studies based on the work of Edmonds, Brookover, and Weber and reported in the work of the I/D/E/A leadership improvement project at Butler University, provides direction for generating a positive response to decline. None of the ideas require the investment of large amounts of cash.

Why Some Schools Are Effective

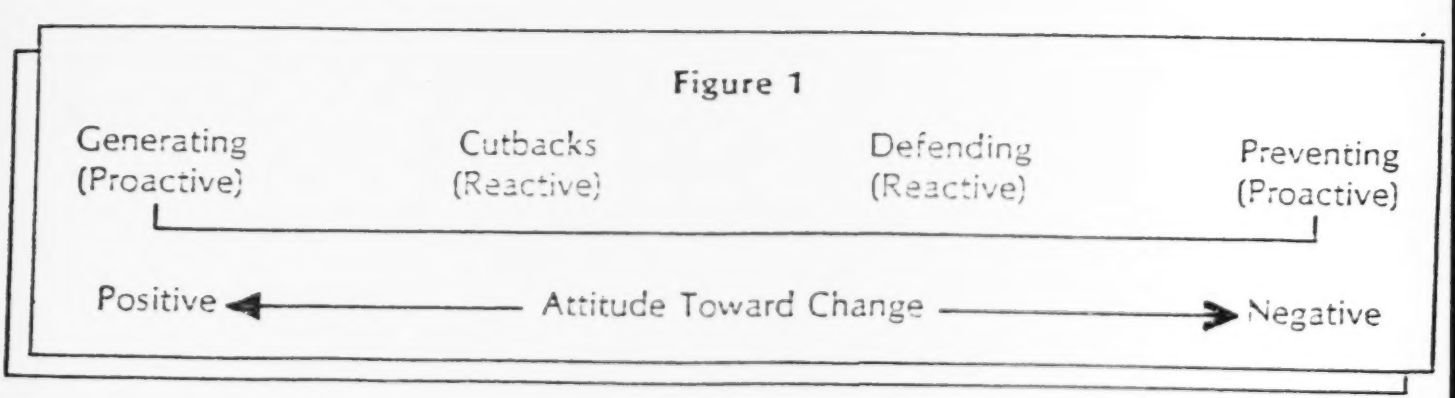
1. The building principal is an instructional leader spending most of his or her time and effort at instructional program improvement, supervision and staff development.
2. A climate where competence of both students and adults is expected and celebrated. Quality has been defined and is understood by all and is rewarded.
3. Decisions are made and resources distributed based on criteria and process understood by all. Decisions that are supportive of instructional program improvement receive highest priority.
4. School programs are evaluated regularly; student and teacher performance is examined in a planned, purposeful manner. Accountability and supervision is accepted. Student progress and staff improvement is monitored and decisions made accordingly.
5. Parents are informed and involved with the schools. Parents understand appropriate roles within the home to complement the school's efforts.
6. Staff has a school-wide plan to improve instruction. Special areas like reading are viewed as important.
7. School climate for learning which is orderly, but not rigid; rules are clear but are not oppressive.
8. Resources beyond school are utilized for instruction.
9. School has a vision for improvement supported by policy and central office resource.

Leadership and Vision

I would like to conclude by emphasizing that in times of austerity the optimistic proactive leader has the opportunity to offer a new vision and help create a new school culture. The vision that most educators will buy into is one in which they have the hope of enjoying the often intangible rewards of being a

participant in creating educational excellence. That opportunity is not lost just because the district is suffering a decline in resources.

Figure 1



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Generating a Positive Response to Declining Resources

50 Ideas for Superintendents

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Generating A Positive Response to Declining Resources

50 Ideas for Superintendents

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1. Combat the negative psychology of decline by initiating new school improvement programs. Educational vitality is a powerful weapon against fear and its traveling partner - stagnation.

2. Avoid unnecessary controversy as much as possible. In economically healthy sytems, conflict may be a healthy byproduct of dynamic change. In a system suffering decline, where much of the conventional steering gear has been stripped away, controversy may well absorb more energy and time than the system can afford. Still, the competition for scarce resources will generate a great deal of conflict. Learn how to deal with it. Consult with professionals who are trained to thrive in adversarial situations such as trial lawyers, arbitrators and negotiators.

3. Ask the questions: What do we do well? Not so well? That does no good? Then redirect your school district's resources to the first two categories. Don't waste money, time and energy on things that contribute little or nothing to quality education. Of course, its not always possible to drop unproductive programs or services precipitously; however, the public's understanding of your district's difficulties gives you the opportunity to cut away that expensive baggage you've been aware of for some time. One school district replaced certified salaried administrators in food service, media and transportation programs with equally effective and much less costly classified hourly personnel. Another managed to eliminate dozens of full time instructional aides in low enrollment elementary classes without causing a revolution among its teachers.

4. Don't be tempted to make across-the-board cuts. Not all school programs and services are equal in value. Across the board retrenchment policies slices away healthy flesh with the bad.

5. Reduce participatory decision making on crucial issues that really have only one course to take. Forums, public hearings, etc. are noteable democratic processes but they tend to increase the turbulence and create obstacles to necessary reforms. Most decline situations demand decisive leadership more than input.

6. Expand staff development activities. Research shows that good inservice programs have a positive impact on student achievement and contribute to faculty collegiality. As an example, one district offered a series of training programs on models of teaching and TESA in the midst of a 20 percent decline in school revenues. The district kept its costs to a manageable level by using trained district personnel as presentors, offering credit to participating teachers on the salary scale in return for a $120.00 enrollment fee, and developing a staff development grant in collaboration with a nearby university.

7. Negotiate incentive plans for reducing faculty/staff absenteeism. In one school district, the average number of teacher absences was found to be nearly nine days per year. After negotiating incentives to be on the job, the number of absences was reduced by one-half.

8. Resist union pressure to redirect limited resources to salaries and benefits. A district suffering a loss of tax base and/or student enrollment can not maintain parity with more affluent school systems for very long unless it has a very large cash reserve.

9. Forge a strong and loyal administrative team that shares a common view of the district's mission and is committed to "a cause beyond oneself." Building principals play a key role in the system's efforts to adjust to the uncertainty of the future. Their expectations set the tone for the life in the classrooms. One of the most effective ways to build team unity is through periodic retreats away from the usual environment. Some superintendents arrange a "roughing it" trip to a cabin or condo nearby. Perhaps an inexpensive church camp at off season or even a donated corporate conference office. The trick is to change the scene, relax and do something special and fun. It helps reduce stress and bond the team.

10. Use the political opportunity offered by decline to get rid of expensive programs or services that heretofore existed only because they enjoyed the support of a small but influential pressure group.

11. One of the characteristics of decline is instability within the organization. Be prepared to deal with ambiguity. Learn to trust your intuition. When faced with an unexpected dilemma requiring a decision, always ask: "What is the best thing for the students?"

12. Check your board policy book. Do you have policies that guarantee programs and services that in less prosperious times would eat up more essential services like Pacman gone amok?

13. Keep your school board informed of as many details as you can. The stress of scarcity results in a great many more calls to board members. They need to have the security afforded by current and accurate information. An uninformed board member could cause irreparable harm to an already weak school district.

14. Build your cash reserve now! Unless you have a crystal ball guaranteeing needed revenues. Be prepared by having at least a 20 percent reserve that is available during emergencies. Its just good business.

15. The collective bargaining units in your district will probably not be sympathetic with the district's economic troubles. Try to negotiate favorable reduction in force and compensation policies prior to economic crisis. If its too late or impossible to reach such agreements, prepare the management team for an escalation of conflict. Some districts have provided inservice training to members of the board and administration on how to stay cool when unions turn up the heat. Its well worth it. Consult your state administrators association or the state board of personnel appeals for the names of trainers in conflict management.

16. Retain a good school attorney. You will need one regardless of whether you do the right thing or the wrong thing.

17. Study the effective schools literature. This research shows that there are dozens of ways to improve the quality of education with little or no expense.

18. Stay in shape! Don't allow the stress of your job to cause you to neglect good eating habits, regular exercise and plenty of rest. It's a good idea to negotiate a membership for you and your spouse in a health club.

19. Speaking of health! Make sure you have at least one confidant. In many ways the superintendency is a lonely and emotionally isolating job. A close friend who willingly accepts your need to commiserate about the problems of the job is worth at least two draft picks and a player to be named later.

20. A final word about health. Take your earned vacation. You and your family need it. The batteries don't recharge on their own.

21. Learn the skills of incremental decision-making which is also known as the "art of muddling through". The instability and accompanying turbulence in a declining environment generally doesn't allow the strategic planning approach that is commonly recommended in more stable systems.

22. Study the research on decline. Hundreds of school systems have struggled with the problem. Their experiences are often reported in the literature. Most administrators have been trained to manage growth. Managing decline demands a broader repertoire of leadership and decision-making skills.

23. Avoid organizational stagnation by involving the entire staff, faculty and community in inexpensive school improvement projects such as core curriculum development, the implementation of effective schools research, more effective discipline procedures, clean schools and grounds campaigns, upgrading the hot lunch program, volunteer artists in the schools programs, spirit days etc., etc.

24. Require each school to develop school wide plans to improve instruction. Provide support by reallocation of resources, obtaining grants or out-of-district coop programs with business, agriculture and other government agencies.

25. Involve the school board with the administrative team in joint goal setting and action planning. Try to arrange a retreat setting to escape interruptions. Provide adequate time to treat the issues in depth while building unity of purpose and commitment to action.

26. Don't allow yourself to be pressed into making decisions too quickly. Some critics may label you indecisive but its amazing how many problems go away with a little time. Remember the superintendent who said when cornered to make a decision, "If you want an answer right now, it's no! If you are willing to wait awhile, the answer may be different."

27. Involve the business manager/school clerk with other budget managers in planning and problem solving activities. It is especially important that they understand curriculum instruction, staff development, and any other school improvement activities. Their support has to extend beyond the need to balance budgets.

28. Typically the last 20 percent of school quality costs two or three times the rate of its first 80 percent. The same affect can be obtained by tightening loose-couplings in the district. Seek ways to increase efficiency, accuracy and commitment in support of quality education.

29. Invest in a volunteer trainer/coordinator and recruit dozens of volunteers to be readers, listeners, carpenters, groundskeepers, enrichment teachers, room helpers, etc.

30. Try always to do the right thing rather than just doing it right. In times of organization stress everyone has a heightened sense of justice regardless of how it reads by the book. You may be forgiven if you say no for the right reason, but you will be despised for sure if you hide behind bureaucratic rules and regulations.

31. Be visable. Give everyone an opportunity to vent their fears to you. Caution! It is wise to avoid meeting with large groups when the agenda is nothing more than an opportunity to complain. Situations that generate a negative and contageous group psychology become destructive to any kind of collective problem solving.

32. Emphasize traditional values of cooperation, teamwork and perseverance in the face of obstacles. Americans still believe they can lick most any problem when the chips are down.

33. Maintain intradistrict communications such as faculty councils, newsletters and walkabouts.

34. Place more emphasis on recognition of staff contributions. Take lots of pictures catching people doing good things. Some districts use a variety of tangible ways to give recognition such as inviting outstanding students and faculty to come before the board, awarding certificates, pins, flowers, golden apples or perhaps feature a staff member of the day, week or month.

35. Over 70 percent of the taxpayers in our country have no children in school. Of this number, the majority are senior citizens. In order to recognize their contributions to the support of education, why not invite them to a free breakfast? One district schedules their breakfast during American Education Week. The superintendent and other members of the administration and school board cook the meal of pancakes, sausage, eggs and the trimmings for over 400 people. The meal, which is served in the high school cafeteria, is accompanied by entertainment from school music ensembles. The cost of the breakfast is less than 75 cents per person. If there is sensitivity to using district funds, donations of food and money from businesses and participating educators might be used.

36. Reward creativity in problem solving. Offer small cash rewards or prizes for ideas that increase productivity and efficiency. Celebrate success by providing recognition to the achievements of district employees. We have parades to celebrate the exploits of a successful football team; next time think about a parade at the end of the semester to recognize all the achievements of the students, faculty and staff such as the prize winning debate team or the national merit semifinalists. Employees of the month, etc., might similarly be honored.

37. Most superintendents are reluctant to open the budget to all comers; however, it's probably the best thing to do in periods of resource decline. Arguing about whether there really are dollars to finance higher salaries and budget can be cut off quickly if the entire budget is open to scrutiny. Indeed, such action will set a precident even for better times; nevertheless, in the final analysis, most public agencies who have had to "open the books" find the consequences are not so bad as they thought they would be, and gaining a measure of credibility helps gain public support.

38. Nominate your school board as board of the year. If they have been supporting the kind of recommendations contained here, they deserve to be recognized for their courage and resolution.

39. Organize school tours by invitation. One district managed to bring in over 200 business and government leaders to a series of tours through the schools and support facilities. Well orchestrated presentations that paid tribute to quality education programs and services in the district resulted not only in moral support, but offers of money, labor and equipment to help the district continue its mission.

40. Prepare video tapes of classroom instruction and school activities to be shown in the bank lobbies, malls and public buildings. Videos of local children will stop even the busiest shoppers dead in their tracks.

41. Participate along with other central office administrators in district staff development activities. The superintendent who will teach a demonstration lesson or otherwise become involved in learning new skills with the rest of the staff will earn credibility and respect.

42. When the appropriate response to a request is NO!, don't say "maybe", "we'll see", or yes. No is a good direct response to any request and it usually is more readily accepted than some waffling avoidance tactic.

43. Issue a bimonthly fact sheet to the staff and community in a "Did you know?" format, e.g., did you know that 98 percent of the students at Parkview Junior High have never been suspended from school, or did you know that the state auditors recently gave the district an A+ rating on its financial accountability measures? Its a great way of emphasizing the positive and setting rumors straight.

44. Speaking of rumors, try setting up a rumor mill hotline. Promise your staff that if they will call in the rumors they have heard to a recorded phone number, you will respond in your weekly newsletter.

45. Try a theme of the week, month or year. All superintendents have a number of projects on the burner at any time. Themes unite students, parents and teachers. Usually the more people involved, the greater sense of colleagueship exists. It will help you accomplish your goals whether its some element of instructional improvment or improving the physical appearance of the building and grounds.

46. Initiate new activities that promote school pride. The usual focus on athletic teams can be expanded to include the adoption of an academic mascot. Use a Smokey the Bear or Woodsey Owl approach with a costume that can be used when making presentations at honors assemblies and similar activities. The academic mascot can be used as covers for school books, on T-shirts and banners hung in the hallways.

47. Develop some skill that you can use in the classroom. We've seen superintendents do a great job demonstrating painting techniques, telling stories and teaching fly tying, hunter safety and kite construction. The kids love it and it will be a great break for you.

48. In addition to sending a fall welcome back letter to the staff, there are endless opportunities to send notes and letters to the staff. Don't forget the personal notes. Some superintendents make a point of sending at least one personal note to every member of the staff during the year. That may be difficult in larger districts, but thanks to the help of the word processor and good secretaries, it still is possible in most school districts. Perhaps the most favored memo of all is the handwritten note you quickly jot down and send to staff members you have seen briefly during your walkabouts. A note of encouragement, congratulations or sympathy from the boss means a lot to everybody.

49. Sometimes it seems that keeping buildings and grounds clean and neat is almost impossible. Plan a couple of clean-up, fix-up days each year. Involve everyone, including the administrators, in activities that will make the facilities cleaner and more attractive. Paint, haul away trash, plant trees and shrubs. Everyone will have fun and it will help your present your best image to the public.

50. Finally, as in all times, never fail to maintain the highest professional integrity. The anxiety created by decline often brings out the worst in your critics and others looking for someone to blame. You have enough problems without being placed on the defensive by criticisms that you or your staff has acted improperly. Still, in spite of a perfectly clean record, you will be accused of error and misjudgment. When that happens, don't ignore your critics. An unanswered assault always seems to gain at least a bit of credibility. But, when you do, respond in measured terms. No one ever won an irrigation contest with a skunk.

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